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Social work and the management of complexity in Swedish child welfare services

Ahmet Gümüscü, Lennart Nygren and Evelyn Khoo

Department of Social Work, Umeå University, Umeå, Sweden

ABSTRACT
This paper elucidates how Swedish child welfare social workers manage complexity co-occurring in the families with which they work and the organisational contexts of practice. Focus groups were held with social workers in three municipalities in Sweden who described work processes generally and in response to a fictitious vignette. The vignette was constructed as a complex family situation to explore how social workers approach complexity when faced with a family with complex needs. Findings showed that social workers are challenged in their everyday work where they are aware of the many needs in a family. They focus on immediate conditions for children while recognising that some problems are less amenable to being solved. However they try to manage complexities related to families as well as the structural conditions of work by sorting, prioritising and oscillating between a child focus and a family service orientation. This paper serves as a necessary reminder of the complexity of social work in the broader area of child welfare and raises further questions about the use of comparative typologies to explain social work practices.

KEYWORDS
Complex needs; family; social services; Sweden; vignettes

Introduction
Research has shown that neither social workers nor clients are strangers to the complex nature of social work practices which take place in various welfare systems and social service organisations. When clients encounter highly specialised – and often fragmented – social services, they may develop strategies of cooperation or resistance that leave them feeling like winners or losers in relation to their service providers (Grell, Ahmadi, and Blom 2016). At the same time, integrated services can not easily solve the ‘complex social reality’ of many problems encountered in social work (Hood 2014). How then do social workers conceive of and manage complexities in their everyday work? This paper draws upon an empirical study in the Swedish child welfare services examining how social workers manage different sources of complexity in their work with children and families. We will elucidate how they struggle with complexities located in and interactively between families, organisational contexts and in the casework process itself. This juggling act involves attempting to attend to these complexities simultaneously whilst trying to prioritise some issues over others and being pulled in different directions depending on whether they are considering the short or long-term outcomes they wish to achieve. Our presentation begins by situating Swedish child welfare services and describing some of their primary characteristics. It then turns to theoretical considerations of prioritising and complexity in social work practice before turning to a presentation of research findings. After analysing how social workers approach the management of complexity in child welfare services, we intend to challenge the implicit notion.
that this complexity can be easily managed or tamed by adopting mechanisms in new public management such as proceduralisation (Munro 2011; Parton 2014). Social work with families with complex needs is, by definition, complex and defies efforts to simplify it (Morris 2012). Recognising the uncertainty that underscores much of everyday practice (Fook 2007) and that is inherent in managing complexity may position social work to better respond to criticisms in the public domain of failing to intervene effectively (Munro 2011) which have lead to approaches emphasising regulation, bureaucratisation and the downplaying of professional judgement.

**Child welfare in Sweden**

In Sweden, each of the country’s 290 municipalities has a social services organisation managed by a local ‘Social Welfare Board’ of politically-appointed laypersons who are mandated to ensure that children in need or at risk of harm receive the support and protection they need (Liljegren, Höjer, and Forkby 2014). Specifically, this board determines whether or not children can be placed in out-of-home care. On the frontlines, social workers offer both children and parents various kinds of support depending on whether a case has come to the attention of the social services through mandatory reporting (schools, health services, police) or whether parents have voluntarily applied for services. Sweden does not have specific child welfare legislation. It is instead integrated into the Social Services Act which is a framing law that covers support for children and families but also for persons in need of financial assistance or who have substance abuse problems. In this way, the child welfare system can thus be described as a combination of controlling and supportive (Wiklund 2006).

In the broader area of child welfare and child protection policy, efforts have been made to typify the Swedish system. The system is widely regarded as a child welfare system, as contrasted to a child protection system (Rasmusson et al. 2010), and which has a child focused orientation with aspects of family service as well (Gilbert, Parton, and Skivenes 2011). A family service orientation tends to view the child’s problems as systemic and intervention therefore focuses on strengthening the family’s capacities and family relations through parental support. A child focused orientation is framed around child development and outcomes where the child’s present and future needs are emphasised along with valuing highly a child perspective (See also: Freymond and Cameron 2006; Healy, Lundström and Sallnäs 2011; Križ and Skivenes 2013). Tensions between family and child orientations exist both at the levels of policy and program design but also figure prominently in the day-to-day work of social workers who, as street-level bureaucrats (Lipsky 2010; Križ and Skivenes 2014), implement policy in child welfare services.

**Prioritising and wicked problems in child welfare**

Child welfare assessment is a complex process whereby social workers try to determine the needs of a child in relation to the parents’ capacity to meet these needs and environmental factors that may help or hinder a child’s needs being met. At the same time, investigation takes place in a context of risk – social workers are expected to be thorough in their assessments in order to substantiate or invalidate concerns about risk of abuse or neglect. Our study of the management of complexity is anchored in two conceptual starting points: prioritising as an aspect of decision making (See for example: Britner and Mossler 2002; or Heggdalsvik, Rod, and Heggen 2018) and the wicked nature of social systems (Törnberg 2017). The first concerns prioritisation as an aspect of decision making in child welfare investigation. Setting priorities, as conscious decision-making, involves first putting forward all the options available and then choosing one priority at the expense of something else. Priorities in the social services are about the uneven distribution of time and resources among clients (Wörlén and Bergmark 2012). How priorities are made varies with the measure being implemented, the number of clients, and the supply of resources in the municipality or organisational unit. Social worker discretion may affect priorities they set in daily work but the scope of action varies depending on their hierarchical position, working area, and the local and national
context in which they work. When social workers target interventions and distribute resources they take into account four main principles: client’s needs, their deservingness, whether clients contributed economically (via fees or copayments) and their capacity to benefit from interventions. Priorities are also affected by factors such as a social worker’s sex, age, family composition and personal experiences of particular social needs or risks (Wörlén and Bergmark 2012).

In addition to prioritising some aspects of a case over another, the complexity (Rogers 2008) or ‘wickedness’ (Rittel and Webber 1973) of a case can impact the assessment process. Wicked problems (Rittel and Webber 1973) are those which cannot be successfully treated with traditional linear, analytical approaches. These are problems that professionals face in their everyday work which neither can be definitively described nor to they have definite or objective solutions unlike so-called tame problems. The challenges in child welfare social work are often complex. More complex cases often have multiple causal starting points, complexity over time and there may be several competing perspectives of what the problems are and how they should be addressed (Fish and Hardy 2015). Wicked problems have also been discussed in relation to evaluation research (Rogers 2008), child abuse and neglect (Devaney and Spratt 2009), public management (Head and Alford 2015) and professionals’ client-making processes (Gümüscü, Nygren, and Khoo 2015).

Child welfare work is inherently complex making it difficult to carry out or evaluate interventions that actually improve or enhance the well-being of children and their families. In Swedish child welfare (as elsewhere) many children become involved in the system because of a complex interplay between personal and individual problems located within the family (abuse, neglect, parent-child conflict, domestic violence, divorce – to name only a few problem areas) or located in the adult world (e.g. poverty, unemployment, social exclusion, inadequate housing). Sometimes, problems are so complex that no matter how rational and thoroughly considered a strategy for improving clients problems may be, these problems may be difficult to define and defy simple resolution (Devaney and Spratt 2009; Rittel and Webber 1973).

**Method and procedure**

This qualitative study is part of a larger research project on family complexity and social work carried out in five municipal social services in Sweden. To obtain a sample of municipalities of different sizes but also having a degree of organisational specialisation, we used a database on Swedish social services created by Lundgren et al. (2009). The database contained all 290 municipal social services in Sweden and these were sorted by size and specialisation. Data for this study were collected in three of those five municipalities; two larger and one smaller, all with different degrees of organisational specialisation. Every municipality has a director of social services who was contacted with information about the study. Those who agreed to participate in the study in turn gave a list of names and phone numbers of social workers in child welfare units. These social workers were contacted personally and given more information about the research. Some of those who could not or would not participate suggested in turn some other colleagues who could participate. We succeed in recruiting a total of 14 social workers: three in the small municipality (ca 20–30 000 inhabitants) and five+ six in the two larger municipalities (ca 70–100 000 inhabitants). While the sample size is small, given that we used a focus group approach and a vignette as a frame of reference, our sample construction can be considered to elicit a wide range of themes that are typical of child welfare services in Sweden (Guest, Namey, and Mckenna 2017). All but one participant was female and work experience among them ranged from one to twenty-five years with an average of eight years experience. All participants had a social work degree, which also was a condition of working in the child welfare units.

This article is based on empirical data using focus groups and case vignettes. The focus group sessions – one in each municipality – were carried out by the principal investigator and one co-moderator and lasted approximately 2.5 hours. Focus groups are advantageous in that they can bring to light both shared and conflicting views, attitudes and experiences from interactions
between participants (Linhorst 2002). After obtaining background information about the participants (age, gender, education, professional work experience), we asked them to discuss how they would define ‘family’, ‘family with complex needs’ and the families they meet in their work. After this introduction, we introduced a vignette in stages (see below) to stimulate discussion of how they would approach working with a family with evolving complex needs. Since all the respondents in this study worked in child welfare services, they could relate to the situation described and could more easily and thoroughly discuss the casework process without fear of revealing information about clients they actually work with.

Vignettes are short descriptions of persons, situations or events, with reference to what are thought to be important factors in decision-making and assessment processes (Barter and Renold 1999). Vignettes have been widely used in social work research (e.g. Glad 2006; Soydan 1995; Krž and Skivenes 2013). The vignette used in this study is considered especially suitable for research on complex situations such as child welfare research and research on social work with families (Nygren and Oltedal 2015). The case vignette presented to participants was designed to be complex with multiple vulnerabilities with layers of causality and uncertainty co-existing in one family but changing over time. The intentionally-created vagueness in the vignette enabled participants to define the presented complex situation in their own terms. A number of questions followed the vignette that dealt with the respondents’ reactions to, and approaches to interventions that they would take based upon the context of the story. Vignettes also enable discussion of actions in context, allow researchers to clarify people’s judgments and are useful in studying potentially sensitive topics. Responding to a hypothetical scenario is less ‘threatening’ than being directly asked about experiences or views (Barter and Renold 1999).

The vignette was presented in three stages as written text. Each stage was framed around a new situation concerning a girl, Maria, and her family, all of whom had several needs which could lead to child welfare interventions. Just enough contextual information was revealed for participants to give them an understanding of the scenario being depicted, but the vignette’s ‘missing information’ also provoked them to fill in details. Participants were asked a series of open-ended questions about the story and about how they should ideally act and/or how would they realistically act if they were faced with such a situation. Summaries of each of the three stages in the vignette story are presented below. The entire vignette and the focus group instructions are described by Nygren and Oltedal (2015).

Summary of the vignette:

**Situation 1**

Maria is pregnant 14-year-old (short relationship with 16-year-old biological father). Maria lives with her parents and has limited contact with grandparents. Maria says that both she and her mother are afraid of her father when he is angry; the last time he was violent was two years ago.

**Situation 2**

Maria is now sixteen years old. She has dropped out of school. Maria had considerable trouble raising her daughter and has agreed to the placement of her daughter, named Moa, in foster care. Violence in the home has escalated and Maria no longer can live at home.

**Situation 3**

Maria is now 18 years old, works and is emotionally stable. She wants her daughter to live with her. Maria has seen her daughter approximately one weekend every month during the two last years. The child has had several changes in foster carers and Maria believes that she would be able to provide her daughter with stability.

**Data analysis**

Focus groups interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim first into Swedish and then into English by a native English-speaker and cross-checked by a native Swedish-speaker. Data was analysed using a qualitative content analysis method inspired by Graneheim and Lundman.
(2004). Analysis began by first reading the interviews several times in order to obtain the general sense of material derived from the texts and reflect on their overall meaning. The second step was to identify, code and categorise themes that emerged from the interview data. Categories emerged showing social workers thoughts and implications about what they considered to be important to address in the case but also how they would work with the family as represented in the vignette. We then connected these descriptive categories to our theoretical standpoints. This process resulted in three theoretically derived categories. Analysis was facilitated with the use of NVivo 11. As a method of analytical triangulation (Creswell 2009), the authors met repeatedly under the analysing process in order to discuss the codes, categories and themes generated from the empirical material.

**Ethical procedure**

Ethical approval for this research was obtained from the Regional Ethical Review Board, (in Umeå, Sweden). All social workers who participated were given written and oral information about the research and they were asked to consent to participate. The participants’ rights to withdraw and decline to participate at any time before and during participation were also clarified. Since the aim of the study was to identify patterns of working with families in social work in where they work, we had no interest in publishing data on an individual level. In cases where quotations are used they have been decontextualised so that no individual can be recognised. In order to enable readers to distinguish between social workers in the different municipalities we have marked citations presented in the findings as ‘large municipality south’ (LMS), ‘large municipality north’ (LMN) and ‘small municipality’ (SM).

**Findings and analysis**

Three theoretical categories emerged from our analyses of focus group transcripts: challenges in confronting complexities, managing complexity by prioritising, and dealing with complexity in an oscillation between considerations of the child focus and family orientation. The respondents’ initial responses after reading and being asked to reflect on how they saw each situation revealed challenges in confronting complexities that could be found both within the family but also in the organisational contexts in which they worked and in interactions between these as they considered the casework process. We use quotes by individuals and shorter excerpts from group discussions to illustrate these categories. In the sections below, we present each category together with a thematic analysis.

**Challenges in confronting complexity**

Trying to find solutions in complex cases where children are involved is not easy as social workers may tend to focus on immediate conditions for children while avoiding problems that are less amenable to being solved (Devaney and Spratt 2009). In our study, however, social workers identified a broad range of needs and problems co-occurring in the family. It appeared not that they avoided complexity but that they sometimes lacked control over what was going to happen or that the problems did not fall within their jurisdiction and this lead to difficulties in describing how they would manage the situation and seek measures to address needs. The Swedish social services tend to be both functionally specialised (with separate units for investigation or care and treatment) and problem specialised (with separate units focused on child welfare; or even further specialised with child units; family units and foster care units). Specialisation was revealed in our findings to pose other issues for some social workers based on the limits and possibilities they saw in the situation and in terms of their possibilities to act. In the following excerpt, we follow a dialogue between participants in one municipality who figuratively turned over puzzle pieces (family members) to try to get a sense of the bigger picture.
Now we wouldn’t get involved since it’s a 14 year old girl… It would probably be our youth team… eventually we might have been linked to the unborn child… we are doing it a bit different… no, we should start an investigation on parents not on unborn child…(LMS)

In the different focus groups, similar discussions arose indicating that the ‘case’ would pass between different units at different times and for different reasons – a highly fragmentary process for children and families to have to experience. The complexity of Maria’s situation as a very young, pregnant teenager, and eventually a young mother with a number of problematic situations in her background added to the challenges that respondents had in deciding how they viewed the situation:

Now there are two children in the picture. Maria and Moa. This is difficult. She has serious problems taking care of her daughter. (SM)

And while Maria is both a child with parents of her own and is a parent herself, expectations are placed on her as a mother and social workers face the dilemma of how to see her situation. In one municipality, a longer discussion took place about Maria and whether, first of all, she and/or her daughter should be placed in foster care – each separately or together or whether she, as a mother, could live independently in an apartment with support. This discussion lead to an interesting digression about the lack of resources available in either case and about parental responsibility.

… she could live on her own… since we don’t have any foster homes… (…)
We don’t have any apartments either, remember that! (laughter…)
She could jump the queue as she’s 16 and a victim of violence (…) But her parents have a responsibility to provide her with financial support till she is 18… (LMN)

Social workers expressed that the kinds of complexity presented in the vignette were certainly possible but that they felt a lack of control over what could happen in such a family and frustration in system failures that could lead to a child experiencing instability in out-of-home care.

Managing complexity by prioritising

Domestic violence and child abuse were considered very strong reasons to start an investigation and intervene by beginning an immediate investigation. In this sense, and perhaps unsurprisingly, managing family complexity involved a pinpoint focus on the immediate issue of violence and attention to the safety needs of the child.

… based on what she has said, there’s violence in the home so that means there’s automatically an investigation. It’s nothing we can decide against… so the process starts right away for her anyway. (LMN)

In the vignette’s second situation, two years have passed and the circumstances of the family have become more complex. Respondents first attended to complexity in the case itself and reacted to Maria’s young age in relation to motherhood and described her parenting challenges, the importance of attachment, Maria’s future education and development, and the problem of violence in the home which added to the complexity of Maria’s parenting challenges. However, since both Maria and Moa were identified as children in this situation, two respondents attended to risk and protective factors that could impact them as both children but also Moa as the child of a teenaged parent.

We’d have to see them both together but also each separately to see each of their needs. Those she has, those her daughter has. We need to have a focus on Moa in a whole other way too because she needs her mother. (SM)
In situation three, the respondents reacted to structural complexity that caused problems from outside of the family which they described as having serious consequences to Moa, who now is the only child in the vignette. They raised the issue of inadequate resources in child welfare but they also questioned Maria’s parenting capacity. Maria’s desire to have her daughter returned to her care was taken in account but the priority at this stage was Moa’s need of protection and the opportunity to develop to her fullest capacity as an individual.

_I have great faith in foster care so I think that this child should not grow up with her mother, she should grow up in a stable, secure other family... Maria can be a good mother through visitation I think, but Moa needs to grow up in a secure and stable family..._ (LMS)

Although few respondents agreed with this viewpoint, the above provides an example of a linear – and wishful – way of thinking that pervaded considerations of the child’s needs. In this example, systems and problem complexity were reduced to the problem of a ‘bad mother’. And, the problem could be solved by placing the child in a ‘good family’. The problem with a positivist linear thinking in child welfare assessment is that we might think that a particular response (A) to a given problem will lead to a particular outcome (B) in all cases (Stevens and Hassett 2007). In this study, respondents stated that deficits in parenting capacity could be eliminated either by intensive supportive measures in the home or by providing the child with protection out of the home.

**Oscillation between child and family focus**

‘The’ family is an ambiguous and changing social construct (Peterson and Bush 2013). This was clearly evident during the vignette discussion as respondents’ definitions of family frequently changed. Depending on how they talked about family, they also expressed divergent interest in focusing on child or family. Discussions in each phase in the vignette moved between a child focus and a family focus. As described above, violence was a triggering factor leading social workers to determine that a child protection investigation was necessary. But, as they turned their attention toward the complexity of the presenting situation and, more importantly, the longer-term desired outcomes they hoped to achieve by implementing certain measures, discussion turned to wider problems in the family and the needs of family members.

They described the importance of supportive services so that family members could function well together and be able to live together. There was also a strong interest in the focus groups to investigate different individuals’ needs with the attention given to the family and its social network. They described measures that they would use to keep the family together, to break the family’s isolation, to end ‘family violence’, and give the family support to deal with a situation (Maria’s pregnancy) which they could not manage with their own resources. Only if those resources were tapped out would they consider external solutions – in this case, foster care as a means to ensure that the child’s developmental needs could be met.

_I think Maria’s mother is also a victim of violence, maybe we need to offer her counselling too, support and investigation, map out her needs or emergency protection... and Maria’s father who is violent, maybe he needs help too... a men’s group//... or maybe the boyfriend needs help._ (LMN)

On the one hand, a child protection orientation dominated their discussion of risk and protective factors in the family. They kept the child/young person in focus and it was the child’s needs that had to come first. On the other hand, Maria was not only a child at risk but the complexity of problems and their potential impact on her were also seen as opportunities to investigate family dysfunction. Respondents described the importance of investigating what was not working in the family and what the family needed help with.

_She is so young so we would want to work with the whole family. The whole family system would be the best because she is getting older and so now that she is pregnant._ (…)
We would work with everyone to find out what is missing, what isn’t working, what is needed. But, I mean if we are going to support a family we would do this supporting in their home, with the routines they have. (SM)

In discussing Maria as a young mother-to-be, she was doubly constructed as a child (unready for the responsibilities of adult life) but also as an individual transitioning from childhood to adulthood and needing help in creating and sustaining a family of her own for her unborn child. In situation two, respondents maintained a child-focused orientation, identifying both Maria and Moa as children. However, Maria has also become a mother whose parenting capacity has come into question and Moa is now in focus as a child potentially needing protection because of her mother, Maria’s, inadequacies. As the respondents described how they would approach a child welfare investigation, their attention returned to risk and protective factors – this time in relation to Moa. They would also however investigate whether Maria’s family (mother and grandparents) could offer support. Respondents also talked about the absent father, Peter. He has not assumed a parenting role and they doubted whether he could care for a child. Because she is still a minor, Maria meanwhile would need support to live alone at to be motivated to complete a secondary education. The following excerpt describes one person’s view of success in social work practice.

**Maybe she [Maria] needs to be in a family, getting support there, and if the daughter lives there. Work on building the contact between the two of them until they can be together. Maria shall be able to live again with her daughter. And, daughter shall be able to live again at home with her mother. And, that Maria goes to school and is passing her courses. We would write a care plan together with Maria. (SM)**

Success – or what one hopes to achieve – can be constrained again by structural problems combined with complex family problems. They questioned inadequate resources in child welfare services that could have led to problems such as matching Moa to a foster family that could look after her. Their descriptions of organisational problems and the fact that Moa was placed in several different foster homes over a two-year period indicated, in the responses of the social workers, that it was not always possible to find stable foster homes for some children. Where structural factors had consequences for Moa, problems located within the family (including Maria and her family) also had to be addressed. They wondered if Maria was stable enough and sufficiently knowledgeable now to take care of her daughter. Given that her daughter had not been returned home during the previous two years (respondent’s interpretation), they wondered whether there was something about Maria or her environment that prevented her daughter from returning home. Nevertheless, in Swedish child welfare the principle of family reunification remains strong in their considerations even though Moa had been in out-of-home care for two years.

**But…(we) have to do an investigation to look into the situation, to see if it has changed and things are so different now that she can go back and live at home… investigate Moa’s needs against Maria’s capacities. . . . . . . (LMN)**

In situation three, we see a shift toward the principle of permanency planning which dominates in North America and the UK. It became most important for Moa to have secure and stable life even if it meant that she could not live with her biological family and stayed long-term in foster care. At the same time, Sweden’s principle that children should have contact with their parents while in care (except in the most extreme of cases) was also a strong consideration. Respondents described working to ensure that Maria and Moa had a well-functioning contact and in one municipality they described a hope that Maria would have a network of support around her that included her parents (who needed support) and her grandparents.

**Discussion**

Child welfare assessment is a complex process whereby social workers try to determine the needs of a child in relation to the parents’ capacity to meet these needs and environmental factors that may help or hinder a child’s needs being met. At the same time, investigation takes place in a
context of risk – social workers are expected to be thorough in their assessments in order to substantiate or invalidate concerns about risk of abuse or neglect. Higher priority is given to cases where there is an immediate danger to a child. These dilemmas illustrate the predicaments faced by child welfare social workers. Our findings show that when social workers confronting complexity they try to manage it by sorting, prioritizing and oscillating between different focuses.

**Confronting complexity**

In initially confronting family complexity, social workers were engaged in an interpersonal process of defining a problem and determining whom may be involved – both in terms of bringing about the problem but also responding to it. How social workers understand problems that present themselves was crucial to how they make later determinations of possible solutions. Firstly, they looked for points of connection to the organisational contexts in which they worked and asked a basic question of whether or not the ‘case’ belonged in their particular unit of the social services. If it did not, it became a tame problem (for them at least) to be passed along to the appropriate service.

Because of the complexity of social problems, uncertainty is a fundamental aspect of child welfare work (Fook 2007). We cannot know definitively how the child and family circumstances will develop, whether harm will occur at some future date, whether a child will likely be removed from home, if it is safe to return a child to home or if a permanent placement is necessary. From the perspective of complexity theory (Rogers 2008), it is important that social workers are able to distinguish between tame, complicated and complex (or wicked) problems. Approaching a complex family and its problems involves being able to attend to the immediate and sometimes even critical parts of a problem. For example, immediately removing a small child from a parent who has just committed a violent physical assault is a critical event where the short-term solution of placing a child in care (a linear and ‘tame’ process in the theoretical sense) solves only one aspect of what undoubtedly is a much larger and more complex problem. Complex problems require us to, beyond immediate interventions, also attend to non-linear processes in order to establish desired long-term outcomes (Grint 2008).

**Sorting and prioritizing**

When social workers do assessments in their daily work they sort out what to investigate. Making priorities in social work includes prioritising between which types of problems to focusing on or on how the top-down distribution of resources is made at the municipal level (Petersson 2006), prioritising based on measures being implemented or number of clients at unit level (Wörlén and Bergmark 2012) or prioritising based on the social workers discretion connected to the clients and encounter with them (Östberg 2010).

The respondents in our study took different positions in how they would manage the complexity of the case and meet the needs of the child and the family. Many of them pinpointed risk and safety issues which were considered critical and demanding immediate attention. However, the respondents also had longer term views on what was necessary for an intervention to succeed or problems to be solved. Even more significantly, they addressed several causal processes simultaneously. A parent’s violence had to be attended to but so did the needs of those who had been directly or indirectly victimised. A child’s need for a good-enough upbringing was a longer-term problem that involved the possibility of coercive services (such as temporary out-of-home care) but also a host supportive measures in the home to address different aspects of the family’s problems and needs – and if a child is in care, to work toward the possibility of family reunification. Given that most of our respondents did not describe placing a child in care as a stopping point for solving the complexity of this family situation, we may infer that that they are experienced in managing the messiness of everyday practice.
Oscillation between child focus or family focus

Social workers’ oscillations between having a child focus and a family service orientation are evidence of their seeking appropriately ‘clumsy solutions’ to wicked problems (Verweij and Thompson 2011) but also reveal some possible limitations to the use of welfare state typologies in framing social work practices. As described earlier, researchers have variously described Sweden as having a family service (Gilbert 1997), child welfare (Rasmusson et al. 2010) or child focused (Gilbert, Parton, and Skivenes 2011) rather than a child protection orientation. In reappraising the Swedish system, Cocozza, Gustafsson, and Sydsjö (2010) positioned child protection as a process operating within a tentatively defined family-service organisation (the social services). Our study supports this contention and further contends that child welfare, child protection and family service are important heuristic devices that can guide us in our analyses of how it is that social workers in different contexts appear to position their decision-making in relation to different ideas about protecting children and serving families. Social workers targeting family within the vignette indicate their awareness of diversity in families and the need to adapt welfare systems to better understand families and their needs (Spratt 2009).

Social worker’s focus on the family was stronger as they considered measures to take than during their initial assessments of the vignette situations presented. In the assessment phase of their discussion, the family was constructed as a relation between a parent(s) and vulnerable child(ren). Children needed to be protected from parents who were either violent or lacked the necessary capacity to provide good-enough care. Ultimately though, interventions were considered that had the intention of making the family stronger, more connected and in which adult members could provide for the care and upbringing of children. In this tension between being child focused and family oriented it was important for respondents to put forward that children must be understood in the contexts in which they live, either with their biological families or with foster families. They did not see the child in isolation and therefore it was also important for them to consider the needs and potential strengths of other family members. It appeared that this family service orientation was basically defined as for the best interest of the child, thus amalgamating a child focus with a family orientation.

Conclusion

This paper has addressed how social workers may work with and manage various situations in their everyday work when they attend to the needs of families with complex needs. Other methods such as field observations or ethnographic research could produce even more detailed information about the complexity of social work in child welfare. Although vignettes cannot replicate social work practice, our study obtained valuable knowledge about how social workers approach family complexity based on a case scenario that they identified as entirely plausible. As we have shown in this study, child welfare in Sweden is indeed a complex field of social work practice as it encompasses elements of systems-thinking, evidence-informed practice and even moral reasoning about good enough parenting. Interventions put into place at any given time and which are directed at either children or families often have a positive value in the present, although longer-term effects are less predictable. We may, for example, place a child in out-of-home care and thereby solve the immediate problem of needing to protect a child who has been exposed to violence, abuse and neglect. At the same time, decades of research have shown that many children and young people who have grown up in the care system have a greater likelihood of poorer educational attainment and mental ill-health (Dill et al. 2012; Österberg, Gustafsson, and Vinnerljung 2016; Brännström et al. 2017; Maclean, Taylor, and O’Donnell 2017). However, we cannot say unquestionably that the care placement itself causes these kinds of poor outcomes. The complexity of children’s life experiences prior to coming into contact with the child welfare system together with new challenges while in the system interact in multifaceted ways which social workers must consider so that...
interventions such as out of home placements do not become one stop solutions (Skoog, Khoo, and Nygren 2015). Families with many and often complex needs may be experiencing numerous, ongoing and interrelated problems that do not respond easily to standardised processes or lend themselves to simple or quick solutions. In this study, we have seen social workers quickly identify areas demanding immediate attention and reflect on the complexity of a case, trying to find successful longer term outcomes for both the child and the family. However, in their accounts, we can see how they struggle with the contextual consequences of increased managerial control of professional behavior and proceduralisation of work tasks (Evans 2010). Although social workers may often be ‘damned if you do, damned if you don’t’ (Barnes 2015), the reality may be closer to the notion that they most often can only be expected to do ‘good enough’. That is, given the complexities inherent in social work practice, there cannot be perfect parents, children or families. Nor can there be perfect social workers (Stevens and Cox 2008). This paper serves as a necessary reminder of the complexity of social work in the broader area of child welfare and raises further questions about the use of comparative typologies to explain social work practices. Although context can be assumed to have an important impact on everyday practice, this study emphasises the need to further investigations of the intricate relationships between contexts and practice.

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**ORCID**

Ahmet Gümüşçu http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5437-4572
Lennart Nygren http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1940-1811
Evelyn Khoo http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9787-362X

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